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Beyond the New Deal

Foreword

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1 American history is often divided per decades as if each one of them, especially in the XXth century, could neatly be separated from the preceding and succeeding ones by distinct characteristics. Hence the major features of each period have an iconic value enhancing the main aspects of the decade while overshadowing less typical events and trends as well as more nuanced explanations of social change. Of course no one denies that the lives of most Americans—although to unequal degrees—were affected by the Great Depression and transformed by the New Deal programs introduced by the Roosevelt administration. The 1930s certainly was a decade when the hope of sustained economic growth based on unfettered competition was shattered, and certainly the decade of maximum poverty with the highest proportion of unemployed workers ever. It was also the time when the Federal government assumed new functions, most particularly when the Roosevelt Administration established the basis of a welfare state and introduced regulatory mechanisms in the economy. No doubt the period was unique, as many historians have argued, not only because of its misery and new social agenda, but also because it was bounded by two periods of economic progress, the 1920s on one end, and World War II on the other which in spite of its tragic aspects engendered a miraculous recovery.

2 Yet life in the 1930s cannot entirely be encapsulated in either descriptions of the effect of the Great Depression or the New Deal agenda. The top down approach that these overarching visions entail has obscured perceptions of life at the local level focusing mainly on the national aspects of the period at the expense of more complex analyses that can take into account factors other than the role of the federal governmentand the national institutions emerging in these years.

3 The conference held at Université Paris VII-Denis Diderot in June 2002 for which the following papers were written, had looked « Beyond the New Deal. »[1] It privileged local dimensions of social movements. It looked at the less classic aspects of public life than the political and institutional aspects of state formation that the New Deal implied. The conference aimed at understanding how local institutions and citizens articulated their

own demands with the national agenda. It sought to know how they ignored, adopted or shaped New Deal programs from below. This approach is less viewed from an institutional perspective than through more fluid aspects of social or intellectual experience, such as religion, culture, ethnicity or gender. These paradigms involve longer trends than just one decade, and thus often lead to descriptions of continuity rather than change without preventing a focus on what specifically crystallized in the 1930s.

4 The importance of transnational forces is another source of analysis present in several of these papers. Beyond the isolating factors of the depression or the domestic priorities of Roosevelt's economic program, American people were well aware of the political and economic conditions prevailing in Europe. Far from the isolationist spirit which determined US diplomatic relations, public attitudes were shaped by international factors. Fascism in Italy, the Nazi regime in Germany, or communism in the Soviet Union were as much present in the minds of American citizens as their own country's situation. Several papers in this collection point to cross-national influences beyond the standard description of 1930s American isolationism.

5 These papers are all parts of works in progress that point to a considerable body of new research on the period. While their scope, scale and methods differ, together they provide new facets about life in the 1930s that complete the traditional picture or create new vistas from less explored paths. They offer concrete examples illustrating how interaction between national policies and local agency can be perceived.

6 In his presentation of Robert and Helen Lynd's second study, *Middletown in Transition* (1937), Romain Huret points out that the sociologists observed less change than continuity in their prototypical industrial town. Huret writes that the changes triggered by the crisis did not correspond to the New Deal philosophy and do not now fit the classical image of the period. The Lynds' 1937 Middletown was not more unionized than before, nor were its social relations more democratic ; the town, as the sociologists concluded, was on the verge of fascism although its 1936 electoral results in favor of Roosevelt, may have suggested the contrary. Huret asks whether this pessimistic vision owed something to the fact that the Lynds had been influenced by Austrian sociologist Paul Lazarsfeld, a refugee himself, whose observation of the unemployed in an Austrian city pointed to unemployment as a prelude to fascism.

7 Pessimism in a world where power and politics were dominated by two forms of totalitarianism was also an ingredient of Reinhold Niebuhr's evolution. As Isabelle Richet shows, the international context bore heavily on the protestant theologian's thought. From a socialist critique of the Social Gospel, Niebuhr gradually accepted the New Deal as a form of political and theological realism, a move which isolated him from the majority of protestant ecclesiastical authorities. But rallying to the New Deal reformism was a minor positive step compared to Niebuhr's final disenchantment with politics. Growing sympathy for the New Deal certainly characterized many other intellectuals who in the course of the 1930s abandoned their initial Marxist beliefs and pragmatically supported Roosevelt's reformism as a bulwark against the menace of fascism. For Niebuhr however, political realism was just an adaptation to the narrow road between fascism and communism. The role of the Church, according to his views, was to remain independentof social and political considerations.

8 In her article on women workers in the garment industry, Brigid O'Farrell brings to light one specific aspect of gender relations in the unionizing process that helps explain Franklin Roosevelt's sensitivity to the labor question. By emphasizing the role of women

in the labor force and union formation, on the one hand, and the support they obtained from Eleanor Roosevelt during her husband's governorship and presidency, on the other, O'Farrell shifts our point of view. What has often been described as a predominantly male world of workers and union leaders becomes, in O'Farrell's work, a world where women workers, with the help of Eleanor Roosevelt, were able to influence the agenda for New Deal labor legislation. Eleanor had supported working women since the 1920's. The contacts established then paved the way towards the National Industrial Recovery Act which opened the door for unionization and recovery in the garment industry, not for women alone, but for all workers. Eleanor's presence in Congressional hearings and cabinet meetings attracted considerable attention from the Administration and the press. It played an important part in FDR's understanding that industrial recovery was inseparable from workers' rights and welfare.

9 In his paper on catholic workers in California, William Issel goes against the grain of general histories of the period by emphasizing the progressive aspect of the Catholic Action movement which in many respects locally supplemented the New Deal in welfare and labor relations efforts. Often portrayed as the seat of conservatism and pro-fascist tendencies, the Catholic Church is here depicted as abandoning its early immigrant mentality to move into the mainstream of American public life. While certainly engaged in a struggle against materialism, secularism, and communism, the militants of the Catholic Action movement played a role in solving the 1934 labor conflict on the San Francisco waterfront by bringing business leaders to recognize workers' demands. Their attitude throughout the decade was one source of New Deal liberalism that contributed to the resolution of tensions between business owners' extreme individualism and the tide of communism in parts of the labor movement. As undertaken by Issel and several other historians, the exploration of local catholic archives offers a more positive and less grotesque view of the Church than the image conveyed by Father Coughlin's gesticulations in the same period.

10 Stefano Luconi's article on Italian-Americans' electoral behavior nuances the classic description of the formation of Roosevelt's urban electorate. He accepts the general view that Italian-American voters, like the voters of other ethnic groups, shifted their allegiance to the Democratic Party in the 1930's in the wake of Al Smith's 1928 campaign. But Luconi refines this vision by suggesting that the timing and the mechanism by which this shift occurred varied from place to place. It depended on what majorities were actually in power in the localities where Italian workers resided. If Little Italies were situated in Republican strongholds, this shift occurred later or may have taken place for national but not for local elections. Ethnicity and class therefore were not the only sources of political identification with one or the other party. Political patronage continued to weigh heavily on the voters' electoral attitudes, even if on the whole the New Deal relief programs and pro-labor policy determined Italian-American workers' votes for Roosevelt's party. But here again, the shift was not automatic and the maintenance of Democratic party machines at the municipal level, rather than ideological choice, reinforced fidelity or allegiance to the party through the allotment of public jobs for instance.

11 Catherine Pouzoulet sees the public housing programs in New York City during the New Deal years as a relative failure. The situation however, as she suggests, is paradoxical. Because of the Depression, and their insalubrious character, 20% of tenement apartments were vacant in 1930 on the Lower East Side, and those occupied were in dire need of

renovation. At the same time, half a million families in the area were in need of low rent housing, a problem which the local and federal administration were willing to solve since New York City had received $ 25 million from the Public Work Administration for public housing. Yet the tension that appeared between the ideas of progressive reformers of the New York City Housing Authority, real estate business interests, and federal guidelines, soon limited the construction of public works programs on the Lower East Side itself. After a few years, and some constructions in Manhattan and Brooklyn, the new housing projects were built in the city's most degraded areas (Harlem, Queens) and instead of adopting the garden city models of social integration advocated by local reformers of the La Guardia administration, they were high density, high rise buildings which eventually reinforced these neighborhoods' ghetto character.

12 Claire Parfait's study of the publishing industry in the 1930s indicates that this sector survived the economic crisis better than many others. Although certainly aggravated by the crisis, some of its problems were not new : the competition from other forms of leisure, the cinema for instance, preceded the Depression itself. The development of public libraries, while offering only a limited commercial outlet, sustained the reading activity and therefore the fertility of the publishing industry. Educated people read more during months or years of unemployment than when fully employed, but their purchasing power did not make them regular book buyers. The industry on the whole was not the object of plant closures or financial concentrations but the depression led it to start more sophisticated market analyses and advertising campaigns.

13 The Federal Government on the other hand directly addressed the problem of unemployed intellectuals with the Federal Writers' Project. The American Guide Series studied here by Ninon Vinsonneau is one particular aspect of this vast cultural program. Launched in 1935 and completed upon the publication of 48 guide-books by 1941, its ambition was to create guides for « the people », not the travelling leisure class of yore, but the working masses visiting their own states, or discovering others. The production however was far from spontaneous and did not give free rein to the local writers commissioned for the task. Vinsonneau argues that the « popular » character strongly mediated by federal guidelines was « constructed ». She reveals a new « folkorist » attitude among many of these writers whose mission was to point out the cultural specificity of the state they described. Culture, or Folk Lore were now endowed with this new anthropological meaning even when applied to urban and working class communities whose culture was vindicated as part of the achievement ofthe New Deal programs.

14 Abraham Plotkin, whose unpublished diary is described here by Catherine Collomp, was a rare person from the ranks of American labor who directly witnessed the seizure of power by Hitler at the beginning of Nazi rule in Germany. Plotkin, an organizer for the International Ladies Garment Workers' Union in the US, had come to Berlin in November 1932 to interview German labor leaders and Social Democratic Party experts. His hope was to gather information to encourage American labor organizations to emulate the German unemployment and social insurance programs. Impressed by the advanced stage of the German labor movement, he was to witness, however, its brutal and tragic downfall at the hands of the Nazi forces. His diary offers an explicit comparison between German and American labor in these pre-New Deal, and also pre-Third Reich, months. It also reveals how American labor came into contact with now persecuted German labor and socialist leaders. Plotkin was one first personal and direct link in the chain of

international solidarity by which American labor eventually supported and rescued hundreds of anti-Nazi and anti-fascist labor and socialist leaders. The Jewish Labor Committee created in 1934 to that effect developed what Plotkin had independently initiated by his 1933 contacts in Berlin.

15 Klaus Patel's article on the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) and its equivalent in Nazi Germany, the*Arbeitsdienst,* breaks with the classic assumption that New Deal reforms were all-American products appearing in the isolated political milieu of Roosevelt's brain trust. The study does not mean that the Roosevelt administration copied Nazi experiments. On the contrary, German labor camps existed in the Weimar republic and were not yet transformed into Nazi recruiting grounds when the CCC was founded. New Dealers, in addition, consciously distanced themselves from what could appear as an emulation of Nazi institutions as they administered the CCC camps. But this suggests, as Patel underlines, that especially in the late 1930s, Roosevelt himself and his advisors closely followed the evolution of social policies leading to full employment in Germany. Without a right wing pro-fascist opposition of any consequence, showing an interest in the German model was less taboo for the New Deal administrators than it has appeared to be to historians in later decades. Patel rightly argues that only by investigating potential influences of similar organizations within the same national context, *and* abroad, can a full picture of an institution or historical development be gained.

16 Annick Cizel's study of the American position on the Ethiopian crisis of the mid 1930s refines our understanding of the concept of neutrality. The many ambiguities of this position are underlined in the paper. Oscillating between the moral Wilsonian heritage and historical non-involvement, the Roosevelt Administration did not act to prevent the Italian invasion of Ethiopia. But neutrality in the world of diplomatic relations, as Cizel shows, was far from synonymous to disinterest and neglect. Rather, she suggests, military neutrality did not preclude other forms of intervention. Non-intervention ironically developed into active « moral » diplomacy. Popular sentiment, on the other hand, was also divided. While American reactions generally sided with the down-trodden Ethiopian population, this sympathy did not lead to the formation of a Lincoln Brigade for Ethiopia. African-Americans were forbidden to join the ranks of the Ethiopian army and their demand for intervention had to compete with the widespread Italian-Americans' pro-Mussolini stance and their organizations' well-organized lobbying in Washington. These two groups' new allegiance to the Democratic Party, in addition, hindered their opposition to the government's line on this issue.

17 The papers above are completed by Nick Salvatore's essay[2] on the relative decline of the New Deal paradigm in American political culture today. By the 1960s, the New Deal had become an archetypical form of government and a framework of social relations. Considerable interest is now vested among American historians in understanding how the New Deal edifice has been weakened in the last twenty years and how American liberalism has become the object of deep political and intellectual criticism. Salvatore retraces the religious sources of this evolution as well as the Republican Party's strategy to capture these conservative reactions.

18 He argues that the New Deal should be considered as « a long exception » rather than the norm of American XXth century political culture. Salvatore attributes the erosion of New Deal culture to the weaknesses of its foundation in a volatile electoral coalition that floundered one generation later. Religious conservatism, among Catholic constituencies, he maintains, as well as the racial divide between white and black workers, finally

overcame the collective benefits garnered from the New Deal and its progressive rationale.

19 This broad synthesis on the contemporary evolution of American political life, retrospectively reinforces the notion that the New Deal was an epochal moment, whose legacy is being eroded by contrary forces. The end of the XXth century has witnessed a situation that may be described as a return to pre-New Deal individualist values of competition and to private rather than public initiative. Yet, if the papers in the series published here agree on the fragility of the New Deal coalition, and see long term trends at work in its construction or demise, they also have the collective merit to challenge the monolithic view conveyed by the name New Deal as the only catch phrase to describe the period. In itself the New Deal agenda has perhaps been endowed with too much power, clarity and homogeneity.

NOTES

1. One part of the papers of the conference have already been published, those dealing with the arts and architecture : see «Au-delà du New Deal, Esthétique et politique de la représentation des années 1930 », *Revue Française d'Etudes Américaines*, vol. 102, Dec. 2004.
2. This essay was delivered as the key note lecture at the convention of the French Association of American Studies held at Lille, in May 2005.